

William B. Robertson

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U.S. Wants An End to Apartheid



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Following is an address by William B. Robertson, Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, before the International Conference Against Apartheid at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, January 19, 1986.

Mrs. King, Bishop Tutu, Maj. Gen. Joseph Garba,¹ distinguished pulpit associates, members of this great church, ladies and gentlemen from Atlanta and around the world, my brothers and sisters. Indeed, I am honored to be with you on this red letter date, this historic occasion. We gather on the eve of a nationwide celebration to reflect upon the life and work of a truly great human being—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King, an American, belongs to the world. As Secretary Edward Stanton said of Abraham Lincoln: "Now he belongs to the Ages." So it is with Martin Luther King, Jr.

We owe Dr. King a great debt. This integrated audience is a testimony to him. I owe the position I hold to Dr. King, as do many of you here today and others around the nation and world.

We must struggle to conquer those who would withhold freedom from any group anywhere in the world because of race, creed, color or gender, whether it be in the United States or South Africa. That is what he would have us do.

¹Maj. Gen. Joseph Garba is the Nigerian Permanent Representative to the United Nations and chairman of the UN Special Committee on Apartheid.



William B. Robertson was born in Roanoke, Virginia, on January 31, 1933. He received two B.S. degrees from Bluefield State College in social science and elementary education (1954 and 1956). He received his Masters (1965) in administration and supervision from Radford University.

Mr. Robertson served as teacher, principal, and supervisor in the Roanoke City school system (1956-70). He was assistant to Virginia Governor Linwood Holton in the area of minority entrepreneurship (1970-74); Associate Director of Continuing Education at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University; and Director of Consumer Affairs in Washington, D.C. (1974-76). He worked as Peace Corps Director in Kenya and the Seychelles (1976-79). Mr. Robertson served as consultant to the president of the Booker T. Washington Foundation for African Affairs (1979-81) and Assistant Director of the Office

of Economic Adjustment at the Department of Defense (1981-85).

Mr. Robertson is the founder of Camp Virginia Jaycee for Retarded Citizens located in Bedford County, Virginia, which assists mentally handicapped citizens in Virginia and Kenya. He was instrumental in forming a sister city relationship between Roanoke, Virginia, and Kisumu, Kenya. He also is founder and chairman of the sister city program between Reston, Virginia, and Nyeri, Kenya.

During the past 20 years, Mr. Robertson has lectured and consulted on such issues as economic development, African awareness, race relations, prison reforms, mental retardation, and volunteerism.

Mr. Robertson became Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs on September 30, 1985. He provides leadership in developing policies and programs to expand contact between African states and the U.S. private sector and to support African efforts to strengthen the indigenous private sector. He also conducts the bureau's outreach efforts with U.S. firms and other nongovernmental organizations.

Bishop Tutu, we owe you our gratitude because you espouse the concepts of freedom and equality for men, women, and children everywhere. We ask you to keep on keeping on.

I was in South Africa last month and, on a Sunday morning in that land, spoke before a church congregation—people who had endured the vicious system of apartheid all week and had come

to receive the spiritual nourishment needed to make it through another week. They brought their babies to be baptized that morning; their pre-teen daughters wore white dresses and sons wore suits and ties for confirmation. What a moving experience to speak before these people of color who came to present their children to God and to receive Holy Communion.

As I looked out at that audience, I saw my mother; I saw my grandmother; I saw my father; I saw my brothers and

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sisters; I saw my friends and neighbors. The miles made no difference. The distance from America meant nothing. The people in that church wanted then and now the same thing that people everywhere desire—they want freedom.

The Quest for Freedom

Much has been written these past few months about the situation in South Africa. Certainly, the conscience of this nation, the world, and South Africa has been alerted to the critical nature of events in that republic by those who initially started the protests at the Embassy in Washington. This concept of bringing attention to that which is clearly wrong and needing reform is one of the purest forms of our democratic system here in America.

Yet, our concerns for those who are outside the mainstream in that country, the disenfranchised, the pass bearers, those who are separated from the full family structure because of a rigid system of racism and segregation and other acts which render them to be below that of even second-class citizenship actually began hundreds of years ago in Europe during the Renaissance—a period of revival, a time of awakening. This was the period when men and women found themselves lying flat on the ground with the heels of other men and women, of so-called higher status in life, squarely in their faces. These disadvantaged people began to cry that human beings are not supposed to live in that manner. They understood that they should walk upright and be able to determine their own destinies. Out of this desire for human dignity, out of this search for collective and individual freedom, America was founded. It continued to manifest itself during the pre-Revolutionary War period when strong leaders such as Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and Benjamin Franklin came to the forefront, and in a struggle for independence we became free and independent men and women.

The quest for freedom was again demonstrated by blacks in America from the time slaves were introduced in this country through the height of the civil rights era to the present. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" oration is a testimony to the fact that Americans desire freedom here at home and abroad for those who understand that there is grave responsibility for possessing it.

U.S. Message to South Africa

Therefore, no one should confuse or misread the message coming out of America today for it is a loud and clear one. This message to South Africa is "end apartheid."

The American public is crying "end apartheid." The Congress of the United States is crying "end apartheid." The President of our nation is crying "end apartheid." Hopefully, Pretoria fully understands that there is no disagreement relative to this position.

This Administration has gone on record indicating its disdain for a policy which relegates approximately 23 million people, a majority, basically to a status of serfdom—this population which cries for freedom, this population which wants nothing more than to be free men and women in their native land.

For this reason, the Administration has indicated that the United States will not abandon those who suffer under this system on a daily basis. We'll not fold our tents and go away. We shall continue to use what influence we have in South Africa to bring an end to apartheid.

Working with groups such as you, those meeting in other parts of our country, those in nations around the world, and, yes, those working in South Africa for positive change, Martin's dream will live in South Africa—apartheid will end.

Each day brings additional news from South Africa—more people have been killed; the press is denied access to those situations which should be reported; arrests have been made. Yes, these are the negatives. Yet, every day people are inquiring what can we do to assist? How might we play a role in bringing about positive reform?

That is why we have assembled at this time because it means more involvement in order to improve the lives of black South Africans. We should and can be involved in such things as:

- Helping blacks in South Africa, which is the goal of our own education and trade union programs which will be expanded under the President's Executive order.
- Using our colleges and universities to train black South Africans in management, business, and technology. We hope every institution of higher education will participate in a program of this nature. Black colleges and universities have played major roles in training those who have been in leadership positions in Africa. We now hope they will

continue this distinguished work in preparing black South Africans who will be the backbone of not only constructive change but also the making of a new South Africa along with others who understand that this must happen. This also suggests that faculties and students work on projects in South Africa which will directly benefit the black population of that republic.

- Helping the neighbors in the southern African region as they struggle to survive and develop in a very difficult part of the world.

Several weeks ago, I sat with Vice President Bush as he held talks with representatives from one of the countries in southern Africa. The Vice President used this as an opportunity to indicate how strongly opposed the United States is to apartheid. The delegates voiced their approval for America's stand but indicated that their land-locked country was really caught in the middle. They, too, were opposed to apartheid but really were restricted from voicing disapproval strongly because they would be subject to retaliation from South Africa. Also, they felt that sanctions would be harmful to them for the following reasons: if imposed, South Africa would take care of its own and possibly put into effect such economic curbs as not allowing goods to flow to shops in that country. Roads could not be used. Its ports would not be available. Members of the workforce going to South Africa would be sent back to the country. Electricity would be cut off, and the litany continued. Eight or nine countries in the region have their economies tied to what happens in South Africa. If South Africa goes down the drain economically, so do these countries. We cannot allow this to happen. If it does, an entire region on an already impoverished continent is lost.

- Using the Sullivan principles via our private sector to create a climate in South Africa, which will indicate that blacks and whites can work together on an equal basis, and utilizing this approach to illustrate that equal employment is good business, that equal pay brings about greater production, that open housing creates a sense of partnership, that training programs and employment mobility lead to a strengthened work place.

We need to add to our activities in order to assist black South Africa to increase those skills needed to perform in

a new South Africa—one that more readily reflects the racial makeup of that republic. Education and business development must be at the top of that list.

Economically, we cannot leave South Africa in shambles. We must stay but always prod for change. We must see that the environment constantly signals change. We must ask all progressive South Africans—black, white, colored, Asian—to join hands with us as we jointly seek positive reform. Our aim must always be that of bringing South Africa to its senses, not to its knees. It must function on the world market when apartheid is dismantled. We must see that it enters this arena with strength.

Appeal to the South African Government

In closing, there is a message for the South African Government. There is still time. You must help to save South Africa. You must take the initiative to bring about positive reform. Lift the emergency. Release Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners. Let black South Africans select their representatives who will go to the negotiating table. Get on with the job of unifying South Africa.

The United States and, virtually, the world are saying to you, in the words of the old black spiritual: "Let my people go." And, in doing so, a strong, vibrant, new South Africa will come into being with all of its people working together. This South Africa and its neighbors will

be the envy of every region in the world. We can then paraphrase the words of James Weldon Johnson:

We have lifted our voices to sing;
We have heard earth and heaven ring;
We have been true to our God;
We have been true to our native land;
We have cared and shared;
Today victory is won.■

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